The Story of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty

Introduction

Radio Free Europe's first full schedule of broadcasting to Czechoslovakia began in 1951. Four additional radio services quickly followed: to Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Radio Liberty began broadcasting to the Soviet Union in 1953. The purpose of the Radios was the same: to provide a free press for the Soviet Union and countries of Eastern Europe where the media were controlled by totalitarian governments.

Despite jamming, acts of terrorism, and opposition by some members of Congress, the Radios remained on the air. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many suggested that the Radios' mission had been successfully completed and that funding should be stopped. Others claimed that a responsible voice broadcasting to countries in which the institutions of democracy were still in their infancy required the continuation of the Radios; Congress agreed and continued funding but at a reduced level.

In 1993, Vaclav Havel, who appreciated the role of RFE/RL as well as the ironies of history, invited the Radios to relocate from Munich to Prague. They currently broadcast from the building of the former communist parliament. Corporate headquarters are in Washington, D.C.

The Origin of the Radios

So in the name of the National Committee for a Free Europe and in the name of all those who have put their hands, their heads, and their hearts into this superb instrument of freedom, I hereby dedicate this station to the victory of humanity over inhumanity. —C. D. Jackson, president NCFE

After World War II, the expansion of Soviet control throughout Eastern Europe and the possibility of communist governments in Western Europe prompted the American government to consider a more active role in the containment of communism. At this time, Western Europe housed thousands of displaced persons in refugee camps, some of whom had been incarcerated in German POW camps and refused to be repatriated. Other émigrés had fled to Paris, London, New York, and Washington from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in advance of the Red Army or as the result of communist takeovers. Many of these Eastern Europeans had held leadership positions in their home countries.

George Kennan of the State Department, realizing that these émigrés represented a powerful force against their communist-controlled homelands, recommended creating a public corporation to use their talents. Toward this end, he asked former Ambassador Joseph C. Grew to enlist prestigious civilians to lead an anticommunist organization dedicated to returning democracy to Eastern Europe. It was incorporated as the National Committee for a Free Europe (NCFE).

The objectives of NCFE were to find work for the democratic émigrés from Eastern Europe, to put émigré voices on the air in their own languages, and to carry émigré articles back to their homelands through the printed word. These objectives were realized through the establishment of a publishing division and a broadcast division. The publishing arm became the Free Europe Press, producing reports, analyses, and a journal. The radio arm became Radio Free Europe (RFE), broadcasting to five countries of Eastern Europe.

The Crusade for Freedom

This is a struggle, above all, for the minds of men.
—President Harry S. Truman

The Crusade for Freedom was incorporated to raise funds and promote Radio Free Europe. It took as its symbol a bell resembling the American liberty bell decorated with a frieze of five figures representing the five races of mankind passing the torch of freedom. An inscription quoted Abraham Lincoln: *That this world under God shall have a new birth of freedom.*

The 10-ton bell arrived from the British foundry of Gillett and Johnston, Ltd. to a ticker tape parade in New York City, then proceeded to twenty-one American cities. People in every state were encouraged to sign Freedom Scrolls and contribute money to RFE. More than sixteen million Americans responded; contributions the first year amounted to $1,317,000.

The bell then traveled to West Berlin, where it was permanently installed on United Nations Day, October 24, 1950. Although the Crusade for Freedom never raised enough money to actually fund RFE-the CIA subsidized both radios until 1972-its advertising slogans such as "Help Truth Fight Communism," along with parades, public forums, and other events, served to mobilize support for America's cold war policies.

The Beginning of Broadcasting

Radio Free Europe's purpose [is to] contribute to the liberation of the nations imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain by sustaining their morale and stimulating in them a spirit of non-cooperation with the Soviet-dominated regimes by which they are, for the time being, ruled.
—RFE Policy Manual, November 1951

Radio broadcasting was initiated when a 7.5-kilowatt shortwave transmitter, nicknamed Barbara and formerly used by the Office of Strategic Services during the war, was installed in West Germany at Lampertheim near Frankfurt. On July 4, 1950, the first thirty minutes of news, information, and political analysis was sent to Czechoslovakia, to be followed later that year by programs to Romania, Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria.

The first RFE broadcasts were produced in New York, sent to Europe, and transmitted from Lampertheim. A European production site, however, was essential if broadcasts were to be timely. West Germany, sharing a border with Czechoslovakia, had the best location and was still occupied by American forces; Munich, the second-largest city within the U.S. zone, was a center for East European émigrés, many of whom had experience in writing, editing, broadcasting, and the technical aspects of radio.

A site on the edge of Munich's English Gardens became available, and within eighteen months, twenty-two studios; six control rooms; master control, editorial, and technical spaces; and a maintenance service were completed. RFE assumed, however, that as soon as the communist governments fell (thereby making RFE redundant), the building would be converted to other uses.

A new organization, the American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia (Amcomlib), first met on January 12, 1951, to plan radio service to the Soviet Union. Despite formidable problems, Radio Liberation, later Radio Liberty (RL), overcame the hurdles and began broadcasting sixty-seven hours a week on March 1, 1953, from four 10-kilowatt transmitters at the RFE base at Lampertheim, purchased from NCFE. In contrast to RFE, RL maintained a low profile without the fanfare, promotion, and fund-raising with celebrities.

The Balloon Projects

Tyranny Cannot Control the Winds.
—RFE balloon leaflet

In 1951, Frank Wisner, the head of the Office of Policy Coordination, that section of the CIA responsible for Radio Free Europe, inherited a stockpile of weather balloons left over from World War II. He immediately imagined a flotilla of balloons dropping millions of leaflets (produced by RFE's sister organization, the Free Europe Press, whose job it was to produce documents about Eastern European affairs) on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain.

A trial project took place over a two-week period in 1951. The prevailing west-to-east wind patterns carried the hydrogen-inflated balloons sailing over the border of West Germany, where they dropped their payload of more than eleven million leaflets on Czechoslovakia.

Following Stalin's death in 1953, a series of demonstrations by factory workers in several Eastern bloc countries encouraged RFE to try a radio/balloon four-day campaign called Operation Prospero. German civilian laborers readied 6,500 balloons and twelve million leaflets at launching sites. As leaflets fell, the Prague regime ordered jet fighter planes to shoot down the balloons. They hit only three. Meanwhile the leaflets dropped on isolated villages, where radios were rarities, as well as population centers.

In 1954, RFE, calling itself the "voice of the opposition," formulated demands to the regime leaders to give the Czech and Slovak citizens a way to veto that year's election. Operation Veto developed a platform and ten limited demands, all possible within the constraints of a communist state. Gummed stickers with the number 10 became the symbol of the campaign, turning up on government walls, telephone booths, and the doors of police buildings. When voting took place, at least 5 percent voted against the single slate of candidates by putting the number 10 on their ballot.

A Hungarian version of Operation Veto, named Operation Focus, was carried out in 1956; it was the last balloon project. A total of more than 300,000,000 leaflets had crossed the Iron Curtain.

The Year of Revolution

Attention, Radio Free Europe, attention! We request immediate information. Is help coming from the West?
—Radio Free Vac, Hungary

The year 1956 became a pivotal one for Radio Free Europe as well as the entire communist bloc, beginning with Nikita Krushchev's speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which detailed Stalin's crimes. Liberal leaders in Poland and Hungary interpreted the speech as a vindication of their views and a sanction for change from the highest possible authority.

In June, a protest over changes in quotas from the workers at the ZISPO works in Poznan, Poland, became violent. Throughout the disorder, the head of RFE's Polish desk, Jan Nowak, urged restraint and prudence, keeping the broadcasts in line with RFE's policy of liberalism over liberation.

In Hungary, however, there was no Jan Nowak. In some quarters, RFE's Hungarian broadcasting was held responsible for encouraging Hungarian resistance, and investigations were initiated by the United Nations, the West German government, a U.S. congressional subcommittee, and the Council of Europe. Although RFE was cleared of provoking the uprising, it was criticized for giving the impression that Western aid was forthcoming. In addition, the West German report also mentioned its tone, irresponsible statements, gratuitous advice, and errors in political judgment. RFE emerged from the events and criticisms of 1956 a more professional news-gathering, analyzing, and broadcasting service.

The Communist Response

Jamming of radio broadcasts is an insult, and a reduction of man to the level of a robot.
—Alexander Solzhenitsyn

The communist response was to jam the radios, producing audio or electronic sounds on the same frequencies, so that it was difficult or impossible to hear the program being

broadcast. Jamming was done by the Soviet Union continually, from three hours after the initial broadcast to December 1988, and by all countries in Eastern Europe sporadically.

In addition to jamming, the communist governments used other methods to silence the radios. Viewing the émigré employees as traitors to their homelands, the regimes threatened employees and their families still living behind the Iron Curtain. Spies infiltrated the radios, occupying some key positions. Bombings and assassinations took place.

The most notorious assassination was that of Georgi Markov, a Bulgarian writer and former associate of Bulgarian president Todor Zhivkov. He was stabbed with an umbrella containing a pellet of deadly ricin poison.

On February 21, 1981, a tremendous explosion rocked the RFE/RL headquarters in Munich, causing $2 million in damage and some injuries but no deaths. Stasi files opened after 1989 indicated that the bombing was carried out by a group of international terrorists under the direction of Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, better known as Carlos the Jackal, and paid for by Nicolae Ceausescu, president of Romania.

In the end, the impact of the threats, violence, spies, and bombing was negligible. RFE and RL continued their broadcasts without interruption throughout the communist period and up to the present day.

Broadcasting Samizdat

Nothing has so effectively underlined the raison d'être of RL as the flowering of samizdat.
—Walter K. Scott, executive director, Radio Liberty

Both Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty became vehicles for disseminating samizdat-self-published literature considered seditious by the Soviet government and other communist regimes. The writings of Boris Pasternak, Joseph Brodsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Milovan Djilas, Andrei Siniavskii, Andrei Sakharov, and others were read on the radio. In addition, Radio Liberty officially collected and processed samizdat, creating the Samizdat Archive in Munich.

The RFE Polish Service serialized the text of Solzhenitsyn's three-volume *Gulag Archipelago* and presented it in its entirety on the radio in fifteen-minute segments. In a letter to Solzhenitsyn, Director Zygmunt Michalowski said, "It was our intention to reveal to the Polish people the communion of suffering which all the peoples subjected to communist rule have been sharing in varying degrees."

The World Changes; The Radios Change

These radio stations are significant even after the end of the Cold War . . . not only because human rights are not fully respected [and] democracy has not yet fully matured, but also because they set a goal for the new independent media, creating a healthy

competitive environment. I wish them well.
—Vaclav Havel, president, Czech Republic

The peace of the post-1956 period was broken with the March 1967 issue of *Ramparts*, a San Francisco magazine, which featured an article about CIA funding of the National Students Association. President Lyndon Johnson called for a review of all CIA-funded anticommunist programs in organizations such as labor unions, publishing houses, and radio and TV stations. The Senate approved Public Law 93-129, the Board for International Broadcasting (BIB) Act that became law on October 19, 1973. BIB would receive the Radios' congressional appropriation and see that it was efficiently managed and that the program output was not inconsistent with broad U.S. foreign policy. The two Radios then became one corporation, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, supported by congressional appropriations.

Under this structure, RFE/RL operated through the tumultuous times that marked the end of the Soviet Union and the return to democracy in Eastern Europe. Today RFE/RL continues to broadcast from its current headquarters in Prague to many countries where a free media is still in its infancy.

—Hoover Institution Archives, 2001